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ABSTRACT

The revelation that three-quarters of a million adolescents leave home without permission each year has received national attention. Yet most lay persons and many professionals know little about the problem. A review of the professional literature on runaways shows an almost equal division between males and females who are more likely to be from low income families. Most runaways do not run far or stay for a long time period. About one in five report unhappy experiences on the road and 3 percent report traumatic experiences. About two-thirds run away because of conflict with parents, while about three-fourths do so because of poor performance in school. Related issues that professionals must be aware of include decriminalization and the need for alternative living arrangements and expanded opportunities for youth employment. (JAC)

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RUNAWAYS: SOME CRITICAL ISSUES FOR PROFESSIONALS AND SOCIETY

F. Ivan Nye
Boys Town, Nebraska

July 1981 Revised Edition

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RUNAWAYS

some critical issues for professionals and society

By F. Ivan Nye, Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development

The dramatic revelation that some three-quarters of a million adolescents leave home each year without parental permission, coupled with the fact that some of them are murdered, become prostitutes, or become drug addicts, has caught the attention of Americans as has few other happenings in this century. Yet most lay people and many professionals know little more about runaways than what they have read in the Sunday supplements.

Actually, there have been many studies of runaways by the professionals who serve them and by behavioral science researchers. What can youth- or family-oriented professionals learn from this massive runaway phenomenon? Does it reveal basic malfunctioning in the American family? Has the fit between the needs of youth and the programs of schools become so poor that youth are primarily running from schools? What are the policy questions runaways pose for professionals and society?

This report draws data and concepts from the professional literature on runaways (now over 150 publications) to address these and related questions—questions which professionals and policy makers must face if the basic needs of youth, families, and society are to be adequately met in the coming decades.

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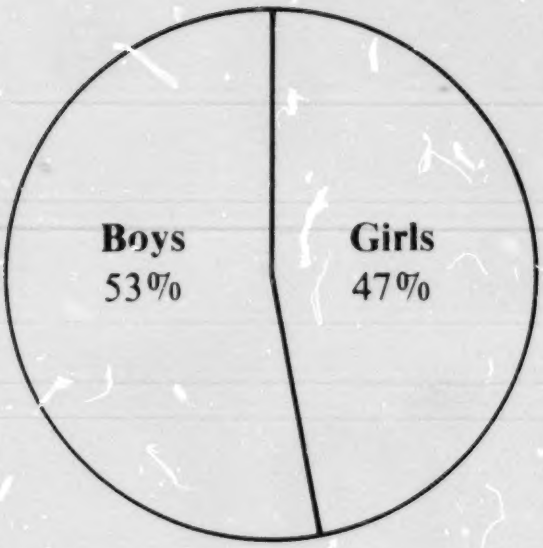

Fig. 1—Percentage of runaways by sex. Data from Opinion Research Corporation, 1976.

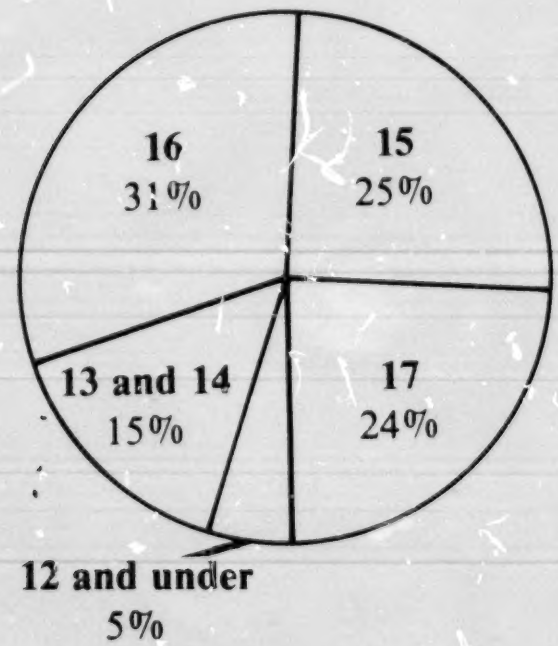

Fig. 2—Percentage of runaways by age. Data from Opinion Research Corporation, 1976.

AN OVERVIEW OF RUNAWAYS

Some Characteristics of Runaways

Recent research has developed a definition of runaways as youth aged 10-17 who were absent from home at least overnight without parental permission. Using this definition, the National Statistical Survey of Runaways (Opinion Research Corporation, 1976), after corrections for under-reporting, estimated that 733,000 youth ran away in 1975. They note that if shorter runs of two hours or more are included, the figure approximates one million—a figure which appears frequently in the press.

Runaways are almost equally divided between males (53 per cent) and females (47 per cent). The largest proportion are 16 years of age (31 per cent). Twenty-five per cent are 15, 24 per cent are 17, 9 per cent are 14, 6 per cent are 13, 3 per cent are 12, 2 per cent are 11, and 0.2 per cent are 10. Some confusion has arisen concerning the sex and age of runaways because of reports from runaway shelters. The runaways coming to government-supported shelters average younger—the largest number are 15 rather than 16 and are composed more largely of females (57 per cent females and 43 per cent males). With respect to these latter figures it should be remembered that only a small proportion of runaways, about 5 per cent, use the shelters (National Youth Work Alliance, 1979).

Runaways are more likely to come from low-income families (the rate is about 40 per cent higher). However, the lowest rate of running away comes not from the highest income families, but from those in the very middle of the income distribution. There is a sizable class difference in

repeater running. Only 5 per cent of middle class runaways were repeaters compared to 30 per cent of lower class runaways (Brennan, et al., 1978).

The lowest rate for runaways occurs in four-person households: only 1.9 per cent of these households experienced a runaway in 1975, compared to the average of 3 per cent in all households with youth 10-17. In most instances these would be two-parent, two-child households. Households with two people, ordinarily one parent and one child, have a much higher runaway rate—5.1 per cent. The highest rate of running away occurs in households of eight or more persons; 7.1 per cent of such households had a runaway child in 1975. The rate for these households is nearly four times the rate found in the four-person households. Probably size alone does not account for all of these differences, since a disproportionate number of low-income families are found in single-parent and very large families.

Racial differences in running away are slight. The white rate is 2.9 per cent; black, 3.2 per cent; Hispanic, 4.6 per cent. The higher rate for Hispanics may reflect, in part, a cultural difference in which children are relatively free to leave their own household to live for a while with a relative. White collar and blue collar families have identical runaway rates. Central cities and towns have higher rates than suburbs and rural areas. However, the differences are not very great: city, 3.4 per cent; suburbs, 2.8 per cent; small towns, 3.4 per cent; rural, 2.4 per cent (Opinion Research Corporation, 1976).

These data are for those who ran during 1975. *Cumulative* data show that 8.4 per cent of families in the National Survey had at some time in the past experienced a runaway event; among single-parent families and households with eight or more persons, approximately 15 per cent had had a child or adolescent run away at some time in the past. Based on this data it is estimated that about one child in eight will run away sometime before his or her eighteenth birthday.

Characteristics of the Run

Most runaways do not run far or stay long. Twenty per cent traveled less than a mile, 52 per cent less than 10 miles. Only 18 per cent traveled farther than 50 miles. Forty per cent ran only one day and 60 per cent were back by the third day. Seventy per cent had returned within a week and 84 per cent were back within a month. Nine per cent were gone one to six months and 5 per cent had not returned at the time the National Survey was taken.

Although these researchers defined a runaway as any child under 18 who is gone overnight without parental permission, not all parents define the behavior in those terms. In 47 per cent of the cases, the parent did not consider the event as running away. They explained that they knew where the youths had gone and expected them to return. In less than a third of the cases did they report the event to police. Apparently parents reserve the term runaway for youths who plan to leave home permanently. Likewise, many youths who are gone overnight without parental permission have no intention of staying away indefinitely and do not consider themselves to be runaways (Opinion Research Corporation, 1976).

Types of Runaways

Brennan, Huizinga, and Elliott (1978) from their extensive research describe two general classes and seven specific types of runaways.

Class I. This entire class is defined as *not* highly delinquent and, in general, not alienated from family and school. They are not pushed out, rejected, or abused. Therefore, more positive motivations may be inferred, with attractions elsewhere having more explanatory power for this than other groups of runaways. In Type 1, "young, temporary escapists," tight controls are maintained by parents accompanied by physical and other types of punishment. Family life is not especially attractive, but these young adolescents have not rejected parents. Parents display indications of powerlessness and societal estrangement. Sixty per cent of the runaways are boys. Type 2, "middle class loners," are older on the average (just over 16 years). They are not alienated from parents. They have high self-esteem and do well in school. However, typically they have few friends. Type 3, "unrestrained, peer-oriented runaways," also average just over 16 years of age. They are independent and largely detached from parents. Family nurturance is low and freedom high. They have high interaction with a few friends. They are not highly delinquent. However, they dislike school and have no educational aspirations. Their lack of ties to family and school provide few bonds to hold them. Their dislike of school seems to be their primary negative reason for running. They run repeatedly, usually with one or more friends. Class I (three types) composed 45 per cent of the runaway sample.

Class II. This entire class is characterized as "delinquent, alienated runaways." There is high conflict with parents, rejecting and rejected parents, high commitment to delinquent peers, personal delinquent conduct, school problems and alienation from school, and low self-esteem. This class includes four types which vary by age and social class: Type 4, "rejected and constrained runaways," is composed mainly of younger youths from low-income and low-education families (average age 14.4). They are rejected and reject their parents, are highly involved with delinquent peers, and exhibit much personal delinquent behavior. Parents attempt high levels of control and punish frequently. Although these youth aspire to educational success, they rank low in achievement. The group includes many repeater runaways. Most parents respond by trying to locate runaways and return them home.

"Rebellious, constrained middle class dropouts," Type 5, resemble Type 4, except that they are older (average 15.2 years), mostly female, exhibit outright rebellion, and are predominantly from middle class families. This group rejects school as well as parents and reports a variety of parental rejection, abuse, and favoritism to siblings. They have high commitment to delinquent peers. Almost all planned their runaway episode.

Type 6, "homeless, rejected, unrestrained youth," also exhibit alienation from parents and school and high commitment to delinquent peers. These are older (average 15.6 years), 62 per cent boys and largely middle class. Parents are not overprotective. These youth have relatively high educational and occupational aspirations but are uninvolved educationally and have no plans for

involvement. Most did not plan a runaway episode and many were not sure they were running away. Parents infrequently notified police. The picture is of little parental commitment or control and little commitment of the youth to anything except a few delinquent friends.

Type 7, "pushouts, socially rejected youth," is composed primarily of boys in lower-class families. Very high levels of rejection are characteristic of both parents toward youth and youth toward parents. Youth reject school and have almost ceased to participate. The only strong ties are to peers, who are involved in continuing delinquent behavior and who frequently exert pressure to participate in deviant behavior. Most planned their runaway episode and run repeatedly. Few parents report episodes to police or try to have the youth return. Some can be truly characterized as "pushouts," others have little if anything to prevent them from running.

Overall, the two general classes are quite different. Class I differs little from non-runaways in relationship to parents and school and in achievement in school. This implies positive goals and interests as reasons for running away. Class II is characterized by high to very high alienation from parents and school and by high identification with delinquent peers and by personal delinquent behavior. These youth exhibit personal feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and low self-esteem. Both classes are divided into subtypes by different parental behaviors based on age and sex of the youth and the social class of parents.

In general, it appears that youths who run are motivated by three groups of reasons:

1. Positive reasons—a desire to explore, to meet new people, and to have new experiences. It appears that about 20 per cent of runaways are of this type (Watterberg, 1956; Walker, 1975; Brennan, et al., 1978; Libertoff, 1980).

2. Negative experiences at home, in the school, and in the community. Youth may dislike school, feel parental control is too restrictive, and have had quarrels with parents or teachers. These range from minor matters of discipline or other disagreements to continued servere conflict and alienation from parents and school. This group is by far the largest category, numbering perhaps 75 per cent of the total.

It is useful to divide this very large group into two subgroups: One is composed of first-time runners, who run impulsively after a dispute with parents or because they anticipate being punished. Most of these do not run away again and most do not exhibit other serious deviant behaviors such as delinquency, truancy, and drug abuse. The second subgroup has chronic conflict with parents and usually exhibits continuing deviant behaviors. Many are repeat runaways.

3. "Pushouts." These youth have been told to leave or abandoned by parents or severely and repeatedly beaten. They feel they have no alternative but to leave. There are no exact estimates of the size of this group, but it may be about 5 per cent of the total (Butler, 1974). The Opinion Research Corporation (1976) in their national survey found that all but 5 per cent of runaways had returned home.

Many runaways who cannot or do not want to live at home find life in the streets no better, and alternate between returning home and going back to the streets.

Experiences on the Road

One of several motives for running away is to have a good time—to not have to go to school, to be free to do as one pleases, see new places, meet new people, and have new experiences. About one-fourth of runaways report that they, in fact, did have a good time (Brennan, et al., 1978). Much of this was more freedom and new experiences, but it also included a feeling of growth, of thinking through one's interests, goals, and plans.

In contrast, about one in five reported unhappy experiences—hunger, cold, fear, boredom, and a lack of any positive experiences. That leaves over half who reported neither. When one recalls that over half were gone less than three days and that most traveled less than 10 miles and stayed with a relative or friend, it is understandable that their experience might lack drama —either positive or negative.

A very small proportion, perhaps 3 per cent, reported traumatic experiences—being beaten, robbed, raped, or jailed with undesirable adults (Brennan, et al., 1978).

Another, less dramatic side of running away, however, may have serious consequences; if youth are gone for an extended period, they exhaust whatever money they may have. Most are not prepared to obtain and hold a job to support themselves. Thus, many of those who stay away for months become involved in delinquent behavior. Brennan, et al., (1978) found that one-third engaged in petty theft, one in six had stolen large sums of valuable property, one in ten had broken into buildings, one in five had sold marijuana, and one in ten had sold hard drugs while on the run. Some became involved in prostitution (Baizerman, Thompson, and Stafford-White, 1979; Bracey, 1979). Of course, some youths were involved in delinquent behavior before they ran away, but running away both provides more opportunity and a greater need for money.

Parents' Responses to Running Away

Many parents (47 per cent) did not consider that the child had run away, even though the youth was gone overnight without permission. Thirty per cent thought they knew where the child was and expected him or her to be back the next day. Others guessed the youth was at a friend's or relative's home. About one in four did nothing but wait.

Of those who took action, the most called the police (31 per cent). One in four called friends, one in six called relatives and one in four talked with other people, including teachers or social workers. Three out of eight youths returned by themselves. Parents located 22 per cent; police, 18 per cent; and friends and relatives, 14 per cent. Runaway shelters returned 1 per cent and social agencies, 2 per cent.

ISSUES FOR SOCIETY

Relationships with Parents

Four of the seven runaway types identified by Brennan, et al. (1978) reject their parents and parents reject them. A fifth type are viewed negatively by parents, although youth have not rejected the parents. Thus, a poor to outright hostile relationship between youth and parents is characteristic of perhaps two-thirds of runaways.

Olson, Leibow, Mannino, and Shore (1980) report that some parent-child conflicts which become overt in adolescence start in the infant years of the runaways. Runaways were more likely to exhibit troublesome, unresponsive, and antisocial behavior accompanied by parental irritation, punishment, and favoritism toward more attractive siblings of the runaway. This suggests that parents need education which alerts them to correct early behavior that is lazy, negative, or antisocial; they also need to guard against chronic favoritism and more severe punishment of some children than others. In more general terms, it means that parents need help in understanding how children can be effectively socialized.

Can behavioral scientists and professionals who work with youth provide guiding principles which would be helpful to parents? Current educational and counseling strategies seem to flow mainly from a humanistic or behaviorist viewpoint and often seem to contradict each other. However, Greenspan (1980) has shown that the prescriptions offered to parents are, if not identical, at least compatible. If Greenspan's synthesis is correct then the issue is how these helpful concepts and propositions may be made available to parents—preferably before children reach adolescence.

Another issue involves support for parents from the community. Parents now receive less support from kin than formerly, since they frequently live at a distance from relatives. The school is perhaps as critical as supportive of parents. The decriminalization of runaway behavior and other rebellious behavior largely removes the support for parents traditionally supplied by law enforcement agencies. Physical punishment by parents may now be defined as abuse and could become grounds for removing the child from the home. Thus, it appears that there is less and less support for parental authority and, actually, that schools and social agencies are increasingly challenging this authority. Is this one reason many parents give up on controlling or even influencing youths' behavior?

Parents need to find ways to help children achieve success by legitimate means. These are discussed in another bulletin (Nye, 1980).

Issues for Schools

Five of the seven runaway types defined by Brennan, et al., (1978) did poorly in school. While some retained high aspirations, their achievement or commitment to study was not consistent with high aspirations. Most runaways do poorly, dislike school, and become heavily involved in truancy.

Rejection of school and extensive truancy seem to be mainly characteristic of middle adolescence—as is runaway behavior and a variety of deviant behaviors. Do we retain all youth too long as full-time students (or, at least attempt to re-

tain them)? Would better results be obtained if, at about age 14, three major alternatives were offered: (1) College preparatory work, leading eventually into white collar occupations; (2) vocational training and apprentice work, aimed at early entry into skilled blue collar occupations; and (3) immediate part-time entry into paid employment (in the fast food industry and other businesses requiring little advanced training)? Youth in the third alternative would be encouraged to continue part-time either in college preparatory or vocational courses. Of course, the choice should be made *by* the youth rather than *for* the youth and should be reversible at any time a youth decides another alternative is preferable. All of the communist countries utilize this third alternative of part-time youth employment and their experiences in working and living with youth have been more successful than our own.

Besides the issue of a variety of alternatives in the educational system, size itself should be considered an issue. The runaway literature provides much evidence of the difficulty youth have in finding a place in our mammoth high schools. Only a small percentage can excel scholastically; likewise there is a limit on the number who can play on athletic teams, be school officers, editors, and the like. In small high schools there is a place for almost every student who is willing to make an effort in scholarship or a school activity. Shouldn't youth have at least an alternative of attending small junior and senior high schools—perhaps of 50 to 100 enrollment? Small schools would also provide more opportunities for youth to know all the other students and to become better acquainted with teachers and administrators.

The Delinquent Peer Group

Many studies of runaways comment on the influence of a delinquent peer group (Walker, 1975). Such a group is especially characteristic of repeater runaways. These youth are also likely to be involved in drug and alcohol abuse and school truancy (Edelbrock, 1980). The delinquent peer group supplies models for runaways, companions for the runaway episode, information about running away, and approval and support for running away. It appears that, in the late 1970's and 1980's at least, a delinquent subculture exists in and out of school among middle adolescents. This culture is composed of anti-parent, anti-school, anti-police, and perhaps anti-work beliefs and values. It includes information and strategies to circumvent the authority and control of parents, schools, and law enforcement agencies and illegitimate strategies for meeting adolescent needs and goals. It provides a set of alternatives to conventional behaviors.

The delinquent peer group appears to be quite influential in encouraging deviant behavior, including running away. In general, its effects are detrimental for society, for parents, and, in long-term perspective, for adolescents. How can this contra-culture be dismantled and this influence toward antisocial behavior be reduced? This is not the same question as how to eliminate deviant behavior, although to break up the culture and disband the peer groups would surely help to reduce it.

One strategy, of course, is to render legitimate alternatives more attractive and to devise ways to increase the attractiveness and competence of ado-

lescents so they are more accepted by non-delinquent peers. Another is to develop more interesting recreation and better social relationships within the family, so that youth are less dependent on peers. But beyond these, could society achieve results by a more vigorous attack on the delinquent subculture and organized delinquent groups? For some time, there has been a tendency to view the criminal as the vitcim and society as the culprit (Ryan, 1971). Does not this support delinquent groups and the delinquent culture by offering legitimization?

Decriminalization

Decriminalization of running away and of "incorrigible" behavior might appear to not be an issue in the 1980's, since the matter seems to have been decided in favor of decriminalization. However, the transfer of hundreds of status offenders in each state from the criminal justice system to social welfare departments poses new questions. For example, are sufficient funds also transferred to service these runaways? Does decriminalization leave some youth without needed services?

Since the runaway, *per se,* is no longer an offender, how can the youth be detained if he or she seems in need of services (for example, has a drug problem, is a truant, or is persistently delinquent)? Two patterns are emerging and doubtless there are others. One involves reclassification; e.g., if he or she is a chronic delinquent then the runaway will be classified as a delinquent. Another pattern is for a judge to issue an order requiring the youth to remain in a treatment facility on penalty of contempt of court if he or she leaves. The legality of this action is being tested in the courts.

Alternative Living Arrangements

Just as over two million husbands and wives each year find they cannot continue to live together, tens of thousands of adolescents and parents decide that it is best that they cease to live together. If families are sufficiently affluent, adolescents may be placed in deluxe boarding schools. Some live with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives. Other adolescents run away, finding independent living or a group care facility; some are in prisons and reformatories; some are in foster care. Some of these alternatives are chosen by adolescents, some by parents; still others are prescribed by the courts.

American society must face the issues raised: How many youth shall be given care away from their families; how shall those decisions be reached; what living arrangements shall be provided for homeless, alienated youth? How many should be legally emancipated to try to function as adults?

Obviously it is expensive. One boarding school advertises 50 staff to care for 80 youth. This would include teachers and perhaps guards as well as caregivers. In addition, living away from home requires additional housing, utilities, meal preparation, clothing care, shopping, counseling, and other activities which families usually provide. On the positive side, it provides a "safety valve" for parents and youths who are alienated and for those who engage in physical conflict.

Social Research

As America enters the 1980's, it has a large population of youth with major, chronic unmet needs. Brennan, et al. (1978) find that about half of the runaway population is involved in delinquent behavior on a continuing basis. About the same proportion has negative, conflictual relationships with parents, dislikes school, and is failing to achieve in school or is involved in truancy. Edelbrock (1980) has shown that these youth are also likely to be involved in drug and alcohol abuse, to have poor self-concepts, and to report powerlessness and normlessness.

The question for researchers and theoreticians is: What maladaptive behaviors on the part of parents and children underlie this complex of deviant behaviors and personal and social pathology? One can hardly think of a more challenging set of issues for researchers, or for educators and practitioners who counsel with parents.

Social Responsibility

The 1970's brought more and more autonomy to children and youth. Both scholarly and popular literature took the position that each individual should determine his or her own goals (Harris, 1973; Ringer, 1973). Schools at all levels have been influenced toward more and more autonomy for children. The same messages have been communicated to parents and other adults as well.

I am not convinced that society or its individuals can function effectively with this amount of responsibility transferred to each individual (Nye, 1978). But, if American society *is* to provide the autonomy of the 1970's, and even increase it in the 1980's as seems likely, we must socialize children to be concerned with the needs, rights and welfare of other children, of parents, and the public in general. A great deal of the literature, training, and teaching of the 1970's has focused on the needs and rights of one's self—how to advance and achieve one's own goal—and very little on how to understand, be concerned with, and protect the rights of others, individually and collectively. If we do not address these tasks effectively, American society seems in danger of becoming a social jungle.

Expanding Opportunity for Youth

Legislation and governmental policies have frequently ignored the needs of youth. Overprotective legislation has unduly restricted their right to obtain employment, as has a fiscal policy which "fought" inflation by creating millions of unemployed workers. Under these circumstances it has been difficult for youth to meet their needs legitimately through working for the things they want. Youth need policies which give top priority to creating full employment and to low interest rates which provide better opportunities for them to purchase homes and to develop businesses of their own. If we hope that youth will do better and fare better, the needs of adolescents must become the first, rather than the last, concern of American society.

APPENDIX

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SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT RUNAWAYS

Can professionals identify early parent-child relationships which, in adolescence, lead to running away?

Do we retain some youth too long in compulsory school programs?

Are some schools too large for many youth to find a place where they can achieve recognition?

Would some youth benefit from part-time employment as early as age 15?

Can the delinquent subculture be broken up or rendered less influntial as a force in adolescent behavior?

Does decriminalization of running away deprive professionals of authority they need to serve multi-problem runaway youth?

Should more emphasis be placed on teaching social responsibility to youth and less on how youth can attain their individual desires?

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